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Allie Biswas, "The Cartoon Thing," *Nat. Brut*, June 3, 2016.

NAT. BRUT

VISUAL ART

The Cartoon Thing



Work by JOYCE PENSATO with an essay by ALLIE BISWAS | 03 June 2016



The Original, 201, 5 C-print, Framed Dimensions: 34 3/8 x 51 inches 87.3 x 129.5 cm 1, Edition 1/1, 1 (PEN 15/004)

"I am totally a dirty artist."

- Joyce Pensato in conversation, 2015

When Joyce Pensato was a student at the New York Studio School in the 1970s she was confronted with the question of what it was that she enjoyed looking at. The School, which had only been in operation for a decade or so by the time Pensato attended, was an advocate of traditional object-based draftsmanship, akin to the methods of the fine art academies. And so, Pensato needed to consider what it was that she wished to establish as her source. What did she want to place in front of herself, at least for a semester? Apples and

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pears were certainly off the list, as were the standard life models readily on offer to students. Pensato, in fact, deliberately took to making abstract paintings in order to secure a studio of her own, rather than risk being "thrown in with the model and 40 other people." Being gifted with a solitary space did not, though, incite a productive time. Mercedes Matter, a founder of the School and Pensato's teacher, unimpressed by her feeble canvases, insisted that she work from something – indeed, anything. Pensato's response was to bring back to her studio a life-size cardboard cut-out of Batman which she had found by chance as it was being discarded on the street. Batman became the artist's still-life.



Raging Bull, 2015 C-print, Framed Dimensions: 34 3/8 x 51 inches 87.3 x 129.5 cm 1, Edition 1/1, 1 (PEN 15/006)

This action of hers, almost stumbled upon, would not only steer the way in which Pensato would develop as an artist - as she is known today - but also cement the role of her studio within her practice.

"MESS, DIRT, AND DETRITUS – THESE ARE THE PROPERTIES THAT ARE INGRAINED IN THE ARTIST'S WORK."



Duck Soup 7, Charcoal and pastel on paper, Framed Dimensions: 33 x 25 3/16 inches 83.8 x 64 cm, Signed and dated recto in pencil (PEN 15/020), 2015

Pensato, who was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, is frequently viewed in relation to pop culture, as is natural for an artist who has assembled a body of paintings and drawings (and, more recently, photographs and installations) that depict cartoon characters, such as Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat and The Simpsons. However, Pensato's fascination with these source materials relates more to the innate joy she feels when considering their formal attributes – the rounded bodies, the distinctive ears – and her personal connection to them - which, critically, arises from the decrepit physical state of the toys and models from which she works, as well as their ongoing deterioration within her studio – rather than her desire to present such figures as cultural metaphors. When asked if she liked Batman as a "trope", the artist, in her typical straightforward style, replied: "I couldn't give a shit about that."

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Duck Soup 7, 2015, Charcoal and pastel on paper, Framed Dimensions: 33 x 25 3/16 inches 83.8 x 64 cm, Signed and dated recto in pencil (PEN 15/020)

"BATMAN BECAME THE ARTIST'S STILL-LIFE."

The Batman figure that was salvaged in 1976 was one of many comic-related props which were brought back to Pensato's studio, and became the subject of her work at the time. "Since I loved pop culture and discarded things," the artist once recounted, "I filled my studio full of debris." Starting out in one corner, her rubble slowly took over the entire room.

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"WHEN ASKED IF SHE LIKED BATMAN AS A 'TROPE', THE ARTIST, IN HER TYPICAL STRAIGHTFORWARD STYLE, REPLIED: 'I COULDN'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THAT.'"

Her skill for accumulation – like a credible hoarder – has, since that moment, become central to her identity



Mouse Mask, 2015, Charcoal and pastel on paper, Framed: 25.18 x 33 inches; 64 x 83.8 cm, Signed and dated recto in pencil (PEN 15/022)

and, consequently, her approach to art-making. Mess, dirt, and detritus – these are the properties that are ingrained in the artist's work. To Pensato, pop culture, it transpires, equates to troublesome histories indicated by soiled physical appearances. "What a mess they were!" the artist has explained of the toys she would find in the gutter, or be given as hand-me-downs. "Their hair was coming out, they had had a hard time."

Other than generating a focus for the artist, placing the cardboard cut-out of Batman in the middle of her studio, surrounded by various other pop remnants, instilled in Pensato a propensity for preserving her references and

inspirations. Even as a student she remembers that her teacher would "drag in visitors not to see my paintings, but to see the set-up." Such has been the significance of Pensato's studio that it has taken on the status of fully-fledged work. Nearly forty years later, her studio contents formed part of her third exhibition at Petzel, New York, who has represented Pensato since 2007. A couple of years later, in 2014, her studio was recreated in its entirety for her first show at Lisson Gallery, London, aptly titled 'Joyceland.' Like her stuffed animals and plastic toys, with their depleted exteriors, these displays revealed Pensato's studio to be a little grisly, with the surface of every poster, stool, battery-activated doll, and crate having been assaulted multiple times by stiff, impenetrable splatters of paint and dense soot. As a multitude of objects, gathered over thirty years in the same studio, they were considerable in their sheer volume.



Holy Blackout Batman, 2015, Enamel and metallic paint on canvas, Framed Dimensions: 90 x 80 inches 228.6 x 203.2 cm, Signed, titled and dated verso (PEN 15/027)

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All of this, evidently, is tied to the way in which Pensato paints. Her large-scale enamel paintings and charcoal drawings mimic the mess of her studio. The faces of her comic-book characters appear through a vigorous blast of layered drips and scratches, mainly in black, white and silver. Her brushstrokes are fierce and unending, often giving the impression of having been sprayed on at great speed.

Pensato only recently garnered mainstream attention, having spent most of the last three decades unrecognized. In the '80s she continued to make the abstract oil paintings she first ventured prior to discovering that cardboard cut-out of Batman, clearly unable to convince herself of "the cartoon thing." It was only after a dealer from Paris took interest in her drawings of Mickey Mouse nearly fifteen years later that she accepted their legitimacy, but even then Pensato was resisting her intuition. Instead of embracing her messiness, she was cleaning up each canvas, purposely aiming to make things look sleek. It was the events of September 11 that propelled Pensato to re-think everything. Homebound to New York, she recalls a conversation with Ira Wool – father of her friend and one-time studio mate, Christopher Wool – who proclaimed her "the queen of falling apart." Considering Pensato's work over the last ten years, it is almost unimaginable to think that at one time she was denying the drips and the dirt.



Castaway Homer, 2015, Enamel and metallic paint on canvas, Dimensions: 90 x 80 inches 228.6 x 203.2 cm, Signed, titled and dated verso (PEN 15/034)



Joyce Pensato lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



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<http://www.natbrut.com/joyce-pensato.html>